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THE WAY STATION

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PREVIOUSLY...

Roland Deschain is the last gunslinger of the line of Arthur Eld. His quest is the pursuit of the elusive Man in Black, and will not stop until he brings him to the Dark Tower.

His travels have taken him to many strange places, most recently Tull, a town whose residents Roland was forced to kill to stay alive as they attacked him en masse.

Now, as he crosses the endless Mohaine desert, the gunslinger believes he has sighted the Man in Black. But that may only have been an illusion, as the exhausted Roland collapses not at the feet of his quarry but rather at those of a boy brandishing a pitchfork...

The boy is John, or Jake Chambers, who tells Roland that a priest did pass through a short time ago. Upon questioning, Jake reveals that he doesn't know how he came to be in Mid-World. He tells Roland that on another Earth he was pushed in front of a car and killed by someone who may have been the Man in Black. Jake then found himself in Mid-World.

Roland tells Jake to sleep and that when he awakens, he won't remember any of this...



During his waking hours, Roland has never been much for dwelling on the past.



Listen carefully, if it pleases you, and you can hear him muttering about what's playing through his head.

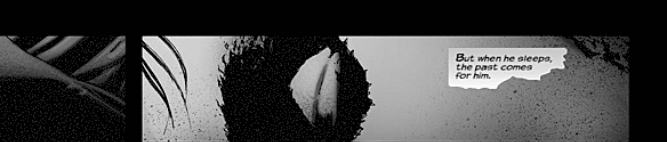
He's back atop Jericho Hill, with Cuthbert Allgood at his side.



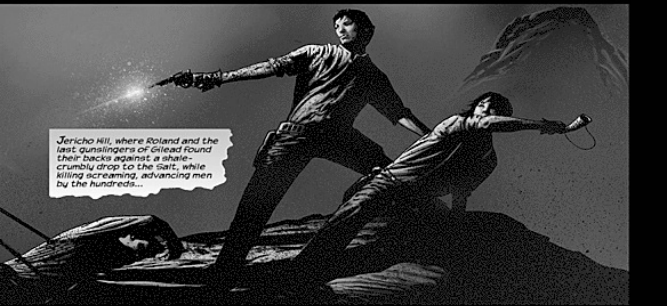
...Which don't mean nothing when thousands more are gunning for you with machine guns, cannons, and weapons that fire beams of light.



His gasping tells you he's convinced he's drowning in suffocating heat.



But when he sleeps,
the past comes
for him.



Jericho Hill, where Roland and the
last gunslingers of Gilead found
their backs against a shale-
crumbly drop to the Seith, while
killing screaming, advancing men
by the hundreds...



"We are betrayed," Cuthbert
must be yelling in the
nightmare, because Roland,
he says:



"Betrayed, Cuthbert?
By...by one of our own?
But who--?"



"Cuthbert, no! I...I know
you're gravely wounded,
but you still have fight
in you! I know it! I--"



"Jake? You here...Cuthbert
gone? Are you...the
betrayer? No, not
possible...but who--?"



"I am the betrayer, Jake?
I betray everyone in the
end...? That's not true!
That is not..."

"...is it?"





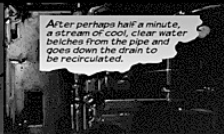


Roland shudders, an abrupt twisting of his back. Heat/flesh pokes out on his skin, then recedes.

He pushes the "on" button. The machine begins to hum.



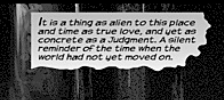
After perhaps half a minute, a stream of cool, clear water belches from the pipe and goes down the drain to be recirculated.



Perhaps three gallons flow out of the pipe before the pump shuts itself down.



It is a thing as alien to this place and time as true love, and yet as concrete as a Judgment. A silent reminder of the time when the world had not yet moved on.



I wish there was someone to ask. But my life is nothing but a slew of violently lost someones.



Susan Pelgado, burning to death on the Charyou Tree...

Alain, accidentally gunned down by Cuthbert and me on the eve of the battle of Jericho Hill...



...and Cuthbert, joining him in death not much later. Bert, riddled with bullets but still fighting. It took an arrow through the eye to bring him down.



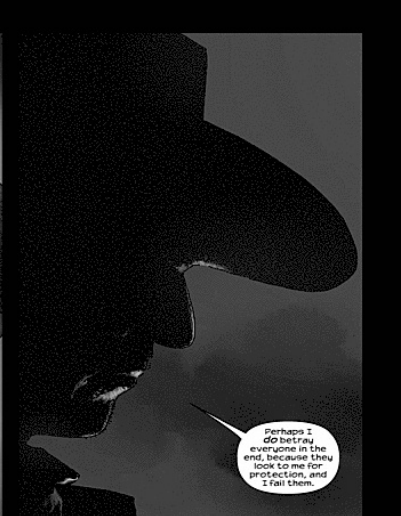
Then there was Sheb, first met--but not well met--at Kambry's Traveller's Rest. Later to show up as part of a mob in Tull, trying to kill me.

Spilling his blood was of no moment to me, but it came at the expense of poor, tragic Allie.





Perhaps
that...that
strange amalgam
of Cuthbert and
Jake was
correct.



Perhaps I
do betray
everyone in the
end, because they
look to me for
protection, and
I fail them.



No...

No "perhaps"
about it.

How does
that song go?
"Love o love o
careless, see what
careless love
has done."

I am the
last of a green
and warm-hued
land called Gilead.
The world has
moved on...

...but my
legs are still
strong, and the
man in black
is closer.



Jake. I was beginning to wonder.

I thought something might have **happened** to you.

An ironic idea if you ken that being away from Roland was a good way to **prevent** something from happening to you.



It was getting dark. I wanted some light.

The oil was in a drum but I was scared to burn it in the house. Everything's so dry.

You did just right.

Jake. We have to palaver.



Meh. Nice word.

I guess you know I'm on the prod for that man you saw.

Are you going to **kill** him?



I don't know. I have to make him tell me something.

I may have to make him take me someplace.



Where?



To find a tower.

Jake's face shows neither fear nor curiosity. Certainly not enthusiasm.

So I'm going on tomorrow. You'll have to come with me.

How much of that meat is left?



Only a little.

Corn?

A little more.

Is there a cellar?



Yes. But I don't go down. It smells bad. It's the only thing around here that smells at all.

We'll see if there's anything down there worth taking.



All right. Roland...

...the man in black. Is he a bad man?

I guess that depends on where you're standing.

Minutes later they are standing in the kitchen, studying the cellar entrance.

You pull up the ring in the floor. I've never gone down.

I was afraid the ladder would break and I wouldn't be able to get up again, and be stuck with whatever's giving off that smell.

Roland...

Yes?

I'm glad I didn't kill you when you were sleeping.

Me too.

The door yields to the gunlinger's strength as he pulls the trapdoor open.

Well... you were right.

It smells bad.



You stay
up here.

Good
plan.

*The cellar has a wet, swampy
stench. Cabbages and turnips
and potatoes with long,
sightless eyes gone to
everlasting rot.*

*It's an aroma that makes the
gunslinger feel nauseated
and a little lightheaded after
the antiseptic odorlessness
of the desert and the stable.*



See anything
down there?

Spiders.
Disturbingly
large ones.

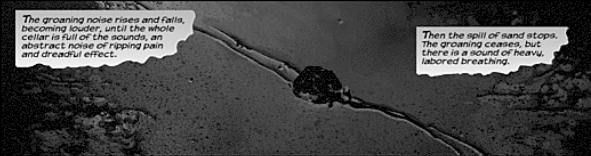


Muties.
I think.

But they
don't seem to
like the light.







The groaning noise rises and falls, becoming louder, until the whole cellar is full of the sounds, an abstract noise of ripping pain and dreadful effect.

Then the spill of sand stops. The groaning ceases, but there is a sound of heavy, labored breathing.



Who are you?

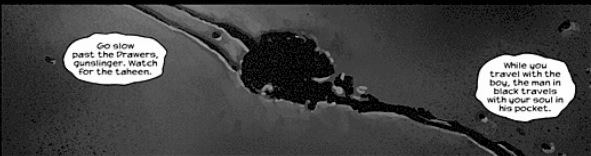
No answer.

And then, in the high speech, his voice filling with the old thunder of command:



Who are you, Demon? Speak, if you would speak! My time is short; my patience, shorter!

And it complies, with a dragging, clotted voice from the dead: Allie from Tull, last seen with a bullet hole between the eyes.

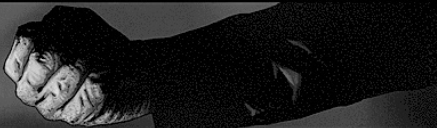


Go slow past the Pravers, gunslinger. Watch for the taheen.

While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket.



It's unlikely that Roland
looked forward to what
he had to do next....



...but the proverb
is inviolable.



And Roland's the
type to heed that
sort of thing.



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All
right.









Roland makes sure to secure all the doors, allowing for the possibility that the spiders might be out and about.

The morning sun will put paid to them, sure as hell.

I wasn't kidding earlier, you know. I had a pitchfork. I could have killed you in your sleep. Killed the only person who ever made me feel safe.

Much obliged for not.



Roland? Why do you need to find this tower? What's there?

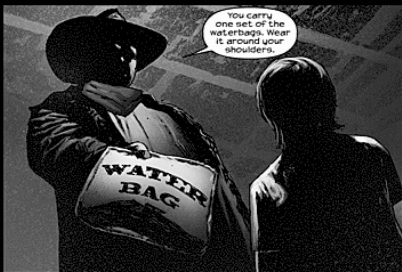
Answers. I hope. Go to sleep and perhaps you'll see it.

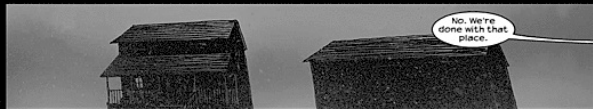


And if you do... tell me what you find.



I betray everyone, Bert...? Not true...





THE PROBLEM WITH CELLARS

I have always been fascinated by cellars. I don't know why. Perhaps it's the fact that they are underground—far from daylight and the mundane, matter-of-fact world. When I was a child, we had all of our Halloween parties in my parents' basement. Ghost stories felt so much more real there, and games like "Feel the Eyeball" always got a few more screams in the dark. Perhaps my obsession with cellars has something to do with my secret terror of tight, enclosed spaces. Like many people I have always feared being buried alive, and perhaps my obsession is a kind of catharsis. After all, I'm underground but I can still breathe; I can still see. Kind of like a temporary interment, but with an assured resurrection.

When I was four years old I tumbled all the way down the cellar steps, and that may have permanently scarred my psyche. It was such a tremendous fall—I was so little, and the stairway was so big—that I could easily have broken my neck. To this day I remember that fall as an out-of-body experience. After that first misplaced step when gravity took me, my memory switched from a view of my slipping foot to a much cooler, distanced vantage point, as if my consciousness witnessed the whole



thing while hovering near the ceiling or at the top of the stairs. It was only my body that fell and fell and fell; the rest of me watched it bump and roll right to the bottom.

In his foreword to *Night Shift*, Stephen King wrote that "the horror tale lives most naturally at that connection point between the conscious and the subconscious." For me, the cellar represents that place. We still have access to the daylight world, but we are no longer *part* of it. We are below the earth, in the realm of hidden, buried things. In books and films, cellars are full of secret passageways, secret laboratories, but above all, those subterranean regions double as crypts. Cellars are the places where we wall up our secrets and symbolically bury our dead.

I think it is my shuddering fascination with cellars that made this month's comic book so much fun to plot. As in the original novel, Roland goes into a dark underground chamber in search of food, but while filling his sack with canned goods he discovers that he is not alone. Brave as he is, our gunslinger feels a dreamy terror wash over him as a thin spill of sand begins to run from between two sandstone blocks, and the whole cellar fills with terrible groaning. To Roland, it sounds as if

something in dreadful pain is "digging itself through with slobbering, agonized intensity."

Telling Jake to run, Roland addresses the spirit in High Speech, his voice taking on the gunslingers' ancient thunder of command. "Who are you, Demon? Speak, if you would speak. My time is short; my patience shorter." The demon answers in the voice of Alice of Tull, Roland's lover who died under his

guns. In its dead, dragging, clotted voice, the speaking demon tells Roland to "Go slow past the Drawers... While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket."

Roland demands that the demon tell him more, but it either cannot or will not speak. The

groaning ceases, as does the labored breathing. With a grunt Roland gets to his feet and punches a hole through the crumbling wall. This is not done out of malice, but out of a respect for Mid-World's oldest customs. Roland must retrieve the bones of the being who made the prophecy, for there is a body behind the Way Station's foundation wall. He is certain of it.

Thrusting his hand through the wall, Roland touches something



solid. He pulls it out and sees that it is a jawbone, rotted at the hinge, with teeth that lean this way and that. He places it in his pocket. "Take the dead from the dead," the old proverb said. "Only a corpse may speak true prophecy." In Mid-World such jawbones are powerful magic, but what that magic may prove to be I shall not tell you. Yet.

In the foreword to *Night Shift*, Stephen King says that when reading horror stories we "have that weird sensation of being not quite asleep or awake... time stretches and skews... dream seems real and... reality dreamlike." The feeling of terror that Stephen King describes is exactly how Roland feels when he encounters the speaking demon, and exactly how we feel when we read about that encounter. It is simultaneously real and unreal, a waking event and something from a dream. And as we all know, our dreams are those images that bubble up from our unconscious, full of hopes, longings, fears, and dreads.

As I said, underground places

are where we bury our secrets and our dead, and Roland is no exception. I believe it is profoundly significant that the Way Station demon speaks to Roland in the voice of one of his many innocent victims, specifically in the voice of a woman who loved

him but who died under his guns. Roland knows she is dead, yet he hears her voice. Some guilt will not remain buried. In the unconscious, it becomes a dynamic, active force. Like a powerful aquifer, or like a voice that wheedles its way through the cracked foundations of consciousnesses, guilt inevitably geysers up through the weakest point in the bedrock.

In the cellar of the Way Station, Roland is communicating with a demon, but he is also communing with his own, deeper self. As we know from the beginning of this issue, Roland is tortured by his own grief and

guilt, yet now another innocent has entered his life—another potential pawn in the eternal game of castles between Roland and his nemesis, the Man in Black. "While you travel with the boy, the man in black travels with your soul in his pocket." On one level, Roland already knows this. An end to Roland's loneliness





could prove to be our gunslinger's salvation, yet to lose Jake, or to accidentally harm him or to let him be harmed on Roland's obsessive search for the Dark Tower, would secure our gunslinger's damnation.

As Stephen King writes, "Fear is the emotion that makes us blind." And I would add that for sight-oriented people, temporary blindness makes us fearful. Most

children are afraid of the dark, and so are many adults. But darkness can be internal just as it can be external. Who among us has not awoken at four a.m. beset by worries and by a "dark night of the soul"?

The Dark Tower novels are not horror tales, yet they contain a fair number of terrifying moments, many of which take place in dark underground places. These places are real settings where our characters are beset by real dangers, but the dangers are also psychological and spiritual. Roland descends into that cellar in order to prepare for a long trek with his latest companion. Yet in his heart and his deep mind, he knows that this trek might lead to death. Not his death, but Jake's death. In the deadly game Roland plays with the Man in Black, there are only pieces for two players.

Until next month, long days and pleasant nights!

Robin Furth



ART EVOLUTION

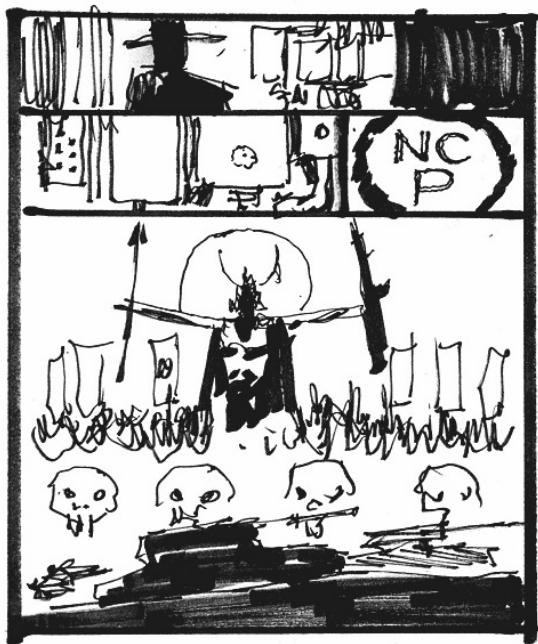
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1. In the slanting moonlight that comes in through the glassless window, Roland sees the water pump which Jake must have used to get water. It is stamped with the North Central Positronics logo. So this too was created by the Great Old Ones?

2. Roland thinks back to the Great Old Ones' weapons—used by Farson—to destroy the Mid-World of his youth. He thinks about the weapons used by Grissom's men atop Jericho Hill.

THUMBNAILS BY LAURENCE CAMPBELL

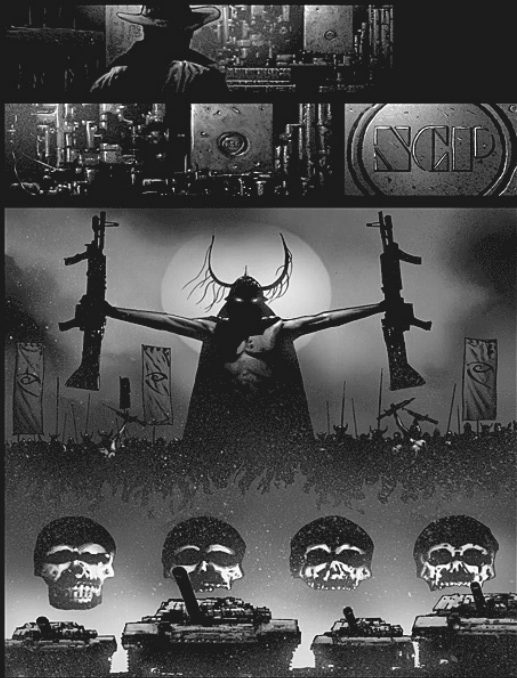
3



INKS BY LAURENCE CAMPBELL



COLORS BY RICHARD ISANOVE



COVER INKS FOR THE WAY STATION #3 BY LAURENCE CAMPBELL



NEXT: "COME TO US..."





The Man in Black flees across the desert with the gunslinger Roland in close pursuit. But is it just an illusion? When last we saw Roland, he was following the path of the Man in Black to find the Dark Tower and set Mid-World right again. Following the trail, Roland was brought to Tull, a sleepy little town in the middle of the desert, where the sinister power of the Man in Black had taken hold. Barely escaping with his life and leaving a pile of bodies in his wake, Roland has come to the Way Station. But who, or what, waits for him there and what is their connection to the world outside of Mid-World?

From the superstar creative team of Robin Furth, Peter David, Richard Isanove, and Laurence Campbell comes a brand-new story in the saga of the last gunslinger. Superbly mixing fantasy, horror, revenge, and betrayal, a story like this could only come from the mind of master storyteller Stephen King.

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FOR STRONG LANGUAGE & SEXUAL CONTENT